Most Web Sites on the Hill Unimpressive, Survey Finds

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A recent survey of congressional Web sites has identified "a digital divide" within Congress, in which a small minority of offices boast sophisticated sites while the majority offer unimpressive ones.

The Congress Online Project, a venture funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, evaluated the Web sites of all 605 House and Senate personal offices, committees and leadership offices. Just 10 percent received grades of A or B, while 90 percent got grades of C or below.

"This is a good news-bad news report," said Rick Shapiro, who headed the survey and is executive director of the Congressional Management Foundation. "The good news is that we found some wonderful Web sites that have created models for how legislators can effectively use this medium. The bad news is that most offices aren't aware that these great models exist, and they're making lots of common mistakes that greatly reduce traffic to their sites."

Part of this disparity stems from the fact that the lawmakers have a different agenda from the constituents, lobbyists and journalists who are searching the Web. As the report notes, those accessing the sites "are seeking basic legislative information such as position statements, rationales for key votes, status of pending legislation, and educational material about Congress. However, offices are using Web sites primarily as promotional tools -- posting press releases, descriptions of the members' accomplishments, and photos of the member at events."

Party affiliation is not a reliable indicator of Internet savvy. Of the top 24 House sites, 79 percent were managed by Republicans and 21 percent by Democrats. But of the 11 award-winning Senate sites, 73 percent were managed by Democrats and 27 percent by Republicans. Among leadership sites, Republicans bested Democrats 75 percent to 25 percent.

The best sites, according to the project, correctly identify their audience; provide up-to-date, targeted content; offer opportunities for interaction; are easily used; and employ creative innovations. The Web site for Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.), for example, features a map of New Mexico that provides constituents with easy access to news releases related to where they live, as well as special sections targeted to students, educators, businesses, first-time visitors and frequent visitors.

House Republican Conference Chairman J.C. Watts (Okla.) racked up 1.7 million visits last year by "pushing the boundaries of what is possible for Congress on the Web and applying practices in line with some of the best practices for private sector Web sites," according to the report.

The site, www.gop.gov, allows visitors to create customized versions of the page, provides links to "hot topics" and posts an online discussion board.

"We have done some pretty innovative things with technology, creating the first congressional Web site to link the entire House Republican Conference together with an organized, central and searchable electronic clearinghouse," Watts said. The site "helps Republicans in the House communicate and get our message out to a whole new audience."

The report also outlined several mistakes other lawmakers were making with their Web pages, though

the authors declined to identify any of the offending sites. These errors included engaging in excessive self-promotion, failing to provide fresh content and including so many graphics that visitors have to wait several minutes to download the site.

A quick Washington Post survey of congressional sites last week found quite a few lawmakers who fell into these digital traps. Rep. James A. Traficant Jr. (D-Ohio) posts a campy image of himself waving a placard that declares, "Bangin' Away in D.C." That graphic, however, makes downloading the site more time-consuming. Rep. Todd Akin (R-Mo.), meanwhile, has a feature that has a July 16 news release as its most recent news flash.

Still, Congress as a whole is making progress. The report notes that a similar study in 1999 found only 12 sites worthy of recognition, compared with 35 this time. According to Shapiro, the benefits of having a good site are obvious: California Rep. Mike Honda, a Democrat from Silicon Valley, receives more communications via the Internet than by phone, fax and mail combined.

"If you build it, they will come," Shapiro said.

THE WEEK AHEAD: Both the House and Senate will return briefly this week to hear President Bush's State of the Union address. The House will vote only on Tuesday, on a few noncontroversial bills, including a resolution honoring the late Dave Thomas, founder of Wendy's. The Senate is slated to take up an economic stimulus plan proposed by Majority Leader Thomas A. Daschle (D-S.D.) and also will do any voting only on Tuesday.